

## Hindrances: Up Close and Personal

### Dialogue On The Hindrances:

#### Up Close and Personal

by Venerable Bhante Vimalaramsi, Brian, KK  
and transcribed by Brian

It began as an online dialogue about the hindrances. It was between a myself and a student named Brian. It took place at the [Dhammasukkha discussion group](#). There was an ongoing discussion concerning the various aspects of the practice of meditation. An entry was made and what followed evolved into what has shown to be a valuable look at the hindrances. So, we invite you to have a look hoping you find some use out of it for your practice.

The dialogue went on for several days with contemplation and testing out the views in practice in between.

*In the beginning , it began like this:*

I should like very much to hear about the Hindrances and what others has learned about them?

**BRIAN:** [responding to Khanti Khema]: I can divide what I've been taught about the teachings on the hindrances into 2 basic flavors. Flavor #1 advises the meditator to just bring mindfulness to the hindrance, to pay attention to its arising and passing away with on looking equanimity. This appears to be the approach you subscribe to. Flavor #2, which seems to have more direct support in the suttas (see MN 2, MN 19 and MN 20, for Canonical examples of this approach) takes a more proactive approach. Ayya Khema (not you, the German-born Thera nun) advocated the use of substitution: if a thought of hating arises, for example, one's mindfulness notices this and, with on looking equanimity, substitutes a diametrically opposed thought, such as loving kindness or generosity. The simile given in the sutta (MN 20, Vitakka Santhana Sutta) is that of a carpenter using a finer peg to drive out a coarser peg.

Not to be a fence sitter or eel wriggler, but I can see merit in both Flavor #1 and Flavor #2. I used to be more inclined toward Flavor #2, but recently my newest teacher, Dae Ja Napier, explained the mindfulness and on looking equanimity approach in such a way that I no longer see it as lacking in the quality of Right Effort. The effort to establish and sustain mindfulness is indeed quite correct.

**BHANTE VIMALARAMSI:** I just saw what you wrote to Khema about the hindrances and thought I would add my two cents to it. What I have found in my own practice is that "HOW" the hindrances arise is more important to observe than what the content of the hindrance actually is. By this I mean, when we follow the way dependent origination works and see the process clearly then we can begin to let the hindrances be, without the tightness in both mind and body [head mostly] caused by the craving and the thoughts caused by the clinging.

The watching of a hindrance in the Vipassana way seems to work, kind of, [I practiced that way for twenty years] but I have found that there is still some residual tightness that is not seen clearly and/or ignored. But when we practice the breath or loving kindness meditation as it is taught in the suttas, it is a little different technique than the standard way of Vipassana and other Jhana practices. The difference is adding the extra step of relaxing this tightness in the head and body before redirecting your attention back to the meditation object. I have found that simply watching a hindrance until it goes away is using a form of one pointed concentration and this type of concentration tends to go deep enough to actually suppress the hindrance, but doesn't eradicate it. Why? Because the force of this kind of meditation goes very deep but the awareness of the entire process of dependent origination isn't seen clearly.

Because I am talking so much about dependent origination maybe it would be good to delve into it a bit. We'll start with nama-rupa. We all have, potentially, internal sense organs [eyes, ears etc.] and external objects that are observed [the external world]. Because of this the six sense bases arise, (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind), when for example, the functioning eye hits an external object like color and form this is called 'contact'. Right after contact arises then 'feeling' arises [that is pleasant, painful or neither pleasant nor painful feeling]. This is where 'craving' arises [craving manifests as a

tightness in both the mind and body particularly the subtle tension in the head]. Next the 'clinging' arises [clinging manifests as the thoughts and preconceived ideas that we have about the feeling].

Now, let us stop there and see what the difference between one pointed concentration and tranquility meditation really is. When we practice Vipassana the way it is currently taught the instructions say to watch the hindrance until it goes away. Then immediately redirect mind back to the breath [wherever you are told to watch, the abdomen or the nostril tip and the upper lip]. In doing the meditation in this way mind brings back that subtle tightness to the meditation object [and over a period of time the force of the one pointed concentration will push down the hindrance so it will not arise again, at that time, but when the one pointedness lessens during our daily activities the hindrances WILL come back with a vengeance]. The not seeing of this subtle tightness or tension can cause the meditation to go away from our goal of liberating equanimity, purifying mind permanently and seeing the whole process of dependent origination clearly. So the hindrances are kind of put on hold by force of the one pointedness but they are not eradicated.

When we practice meditation by way of tranquility meditation as the instructions are given to us in the suttas, the results are a little different. The basic instructions say to 'experience the physical body on the in and out breath'. What happens here in America is most people think the body starts at the neck and goes down from there, but when the attention goes up it is considered the mind. This is a mistaken perspective.

The next part of the instructions say to 'tranquilize the entire bodily formation on the in breath and the out breath', so it means that we relax the subtle tightness in our body which includes the head and by doing that our mind relaxes also.

So getting back to the hindrances the real question is "HOW do they arise?" Not why are they there or what can we do to stop them from bothering us. This is the subtle difference between the approaches of the one pointed practice and the tranquility practice. When the meditator relaxes all tension or tightness on the in breath and the out breath, mind stays very alert and mindfulness is sharp. So, when a hindrance begins to arise and their mind is calm enough, the meditator sees some movement of mind that eventually leads away from the breath and relaxing. Mind begins to move and kind of wobble and it gets more pronounced until mind gets pulled away from the meditation object [the breath and relaxing] and becomes involved with the hindrance and all of the reasons that they like it or dislike it.

According to the teachings about the five aggregates there are body, feeling, perception, thoughts [I use this as a general term and know that there is more to it than that but for now I'll use the term thought] and consciousness. When a hindrance arises the first thing the meditator tries to do is 'think the feeling away' so the hindrance gets bigger and more intense. This is the source of the Dukkha trying to control feeling with thoughts. First, there is the strong identification with the feeling as being ours personally and this causes mind to tighten around it and squeeze it even tighter and this causes more suffering. So the force of the one pointed concentration will eventually become so strong that it pushes down the hindrance temporarily and this brings some relief for a short period of time. But, this is not eradication, this is a delaying tactic

Now when the meditator practices tranquility meditation they are used to seeing the breath and using the breath as a reminder to relax even the slightest tightness and let it be, without identifying with it, or trying to control it, in any way. So when the meditator's mindfulness [observation power] becomes weak, for whatever reason, a hindrance will begin to arise and if the meditator's mindfulness weakens even more they won't notice mind wobbling and moving away from the meditation object until it is already caught by the hindrance and becomes totally involved with it.

There is always the 'trying to control' of the feeling with thoughts about why it is there and what pain and suffering it caused by that movement. So the first thing one should do is let go of the thoughts and relax the tightness caused by them. This is done by allowing them to be there but not paying any attention to them anymore and then letting the tightness in the body [especially the head] go. When this is done there is a feeling of expansion and openness in the head and mind, then mind takes a little step down and becomes even more calm and peaceful. At that time mind is very alert and mindfulness [observation power] is sharp.

Next, the meditator can notice a tight mental fist wrapped around the feeling [remember pleasant, painful or neither] and then they relax and allow the feeling to be there without trying to control it. Then the meditator relaxes again and this time the feeling of expansion is a little bigger and the tranquility is a little stronger. At that time mind is pure and free from all craving and clinging. There is no tightness, only a pure awareness and this is the mind that the meditator brings back to their meditation object.

Of course, the hindrance won't go away immediately and this is good because the meditator has the opportunity to look more closely at how the whole process works. The closer they look, the more easily the hindrance is let go of and the clearer mind becomes. So after working with the hindrance for awhile, one will be able to see more and more subtle things arising and in this way will be able to sharpen their awareness to a very fine degree.

Now the thing to recognize is that when the meditator is able to see a hindrance arise very well in the sitting meditation, they will also be able to recognize them when they arise in daily life! Meditation is, "an all of the time practice" not just a sitting practice and this kind of sharp awareness leads directly to the cessation of suffering.

**BRIAN:** Thanks to the fact that we set the clocks back last night, there was an extra hour for meditation this morning (yay!), so I ended up with three sessions of about one hour each, with breaks in between for bathroom trips and a little walking meditation.

It was very noticeable that the arising of the hindrances was manifesting as the arising of tension in particular areas of the body (including the head): a lot of it was in one or both shoulders, some in the hands (a tightening of the right thumb), some in the hips and thighs. Also at one point, a tightness (to the point of twitching) just above the left eyebrow.

In each case, when the tension was noticed, the response was to relax the tension, to smile, and to return to the primary object either the Breath or Metta.

Bhante, have you noticed if particular hindrances manifest habitually in certain areas of the body? By that I mean, do meditators report that restlessness and worry habitually makes their shoulders rise up and hunch? Or sexual desire causes a flexing and tension in the hips or groin area? Just wondering...

**BHANTE VIMALARAMSI:** It is an interesting question you have asked about 'where' certain hindrances arise. And the answer is, that for different people they arise in different places and one can't generalize too much about them. And it doesn't really matter where a hindrance arises in your body. The important thing to remember is to see 'HOW' it arises, how mind begins to wobble and pull away from the meditation object and the calmness. The more closely one looks at 'HOW' this occurs the easier they are to recognize them and the more quickly they can be let go of and relaxation of the movement. When the meditator becomes very calm and their mind is alert, they will be able to see the slightest movement and let it go and then they can see the slightest or subtlest tightness and relax it. This can happen before it arises to the surface and mind is completely distracted by it.

So, the 'where' is only the grosser forms of the hindrance and when the meditator becomes very good at recognizing the 'How' then mind will begin to settle down to a clear bright equanimity that sees even the most subtle of movements and doesn't become attached to them in any way. What I am talking about is very subtle and takes a lot of practice to be able to see clearly.

Meditation is not about "doing nothing", it is about observing, 'How' the mindfulness gets weak and the movements of mind are the beginning of a hindrance. But observing is not all that the meditator does [this is a mistake made by people who practice 'choiceless awareness' and doesn't lead to deeper states of observation]. When the observant meditator sees that movement and recognizes it, then they relax and let the movement be by itself [i.e.. let it go], they are observing 'HOW' feeling arises and then the craving which manifest as tightness arises. Only then does the meditator softly smilingly redirect mind back to the meditation object.

As one becomes more skillful at seeing these slight movements, they then begin to see that there are still more subtle things that happen, which the teacher doesn't tell the student. The student has to tell the teacher about them. In that way the teacher knows that the student isn't making things up or misperceiving the occurrences in meditation.

**BHANTE VIMALARAMSI:** I also want to say something about one of the suttas that you mentioned about the hindrances, it is about sutta #20 in the Majjhima Nikaya, 'The Removal of Distracting Thoughts'. I have to say that I have used this sutta and given many talks about it, until I began to run across this other method of observation and the realization that everything the Buddha taught has to do with the 4 Noble Truths and dependent origination. So I am very familiar with it. But lately I have come to realize that this sutta may have been added later because of all of the one pointed concentration that was being practiced. I have found that the last section about 'ramming one's tongue against the roof of their mouth and suppressing mind with mind', doesn't really agree with the spirit and practice. Forceful suppression of anything causes mind to become attached, ergo my objection to it. This sutta has been taught a lot throughout Burma as the way to overcome these hindrances when they are strong and troublesome. It has the "suck it up, baby" approach to meditation that leads one to many different types of other problems.

The Buddha's approach to meditation is always to gently accept whatever arises in the present moment, so why does this sutta even appear? As time progressed from the Buddha's death until the Visuddhi Magga was written, it seems that this sutta wasn't around or used. But with the popularization of the Visuddhi Magga [written by Ven. Buddhagosa, a converted Brahman] this sutta was added and became more popular. Anyway, to suppress mind with mind doesn't seem to lead to peace and calm. And neither does replacing one thought with another. If we are following the directions about dependent origination these other techniques just don't make sense. How are we supposed to see this process of dependent arising when we are replacing or fighting a hindrance? If we take dependent origination seriously, then the way I have described in the other email that I sent to you seems to make more sense and adds to our own understanding of how mind works. And that is what the Buddha's teachings are all about!

One other thing that I realized is that upon rereading what I wrote before, I didn't explain that the meditator doesn't keep relaxing the tightness in the body until it goes away. For example: tightness in the shoulders, the meditator notices it then relaxes one time before redirecting their mind to the breath and relaxing again. They don't relax...relax...relax...relax... until the tightness goes away. The most important thing about the meditation is to always be with the breath and relax. So, if the meditator still has some tightness and they bring it back to the meditation object [the breath], mind will go back to that distraction and tightness again, and again, but the main

difference of this technique is that every time the meditator lets go of whatever the distraction is, relaxes, and redirects mind back to the breath, that slight relaxation brings with it two things. One is a calm mind and the other is seeing the impersonal nature of this process and how mind moves away from the breath and relaxing.

The more familiar one becomes with seeing this process more closely, the easier and more quickly it is noticed and the stronger one's mindfulness and equanimity becomes. Working with hindrances sharpens one's power of investigation [one of the enlightenment factors].

**BRIAN:** Bhante, thank you for this follow-up. Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh made a similar point in his book "The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings." But as with that work, I would like to know more about this issue. Is there textual or archaeological evidence to support this theory?

I ask, because Majjhima Nikaya 20, Vitakka Santhana Sutta, "The Removal of Distracting Thoughts" is not the only sutta in which this sort of approach is recommended. If it were an isolated instance, it would be easier to believe that it was indeed a later addition to the Canon, as you say. But since this sort of approach can be found elsewhere in the Canon, it's harder to dismiss (for me, anyway). For example, in Majjhima Nikaya 2, Sabbasava Sutta, "All the Taints," in section 20 on taints to be abandoned by removing, it is said:

20. "What taints, bhikkhus, should be abandoned by removing? Here a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, does not tolerate an arisen thought of sensual desire; he abandons it, removes it, does away with it, and annihilates it. He does not tolerate an arisen thought of ill will... He does not tolerate an arisen thought of cruelty... He does not tolerate arisen evil unwholesome states; he abandons them, removes them, does away with them, and annihilates them.\* While taints, vexation, and fever might arise in one who does not remove these thoughts, there are no taints, vexation, or fever in one who removes them. These are called the taints that should be abandoned by removing.

\* [endnote by Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi: The first three types of unwholesome thought of sensual desire, ill will, and cruelty constitute wrong thought or wrong intention, the opposite of the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. The three types of wrong thought and their opposites are dealt with more fully in MN 19.]

And in Majjhima Nikaya 19, Devedhavitakka Sutta, "Two Kinds of Thought," it is said in sections 36, the Buddha recollects his practice when he was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta:

3. "As I abided thus, diligent, ardent, and resolute, a thought of sensual desire arose in me. I understood thus: 'This thought of sensual desire has arisen in me. This leads to my own affliction, to others' affliction, to the affliction of both; it obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from Nibbana.' When I considered: 'This leads to my own affliction,' it subsided in me; when I considered: 'This leads to others' affliction,' it subsided in me; when I considered: 'This leads to the affliction of both,' it subsided in me; when I considered: 'This obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from Nibbana,' it subsided in me. Whenever a thought of sensual desire arose in me, I abandoned it, removed it, did away with it.

[Sections 4 and 5 repeat the above, replacing "sensual desire" with "ill will" and "cruelty," respectively.] Then section 6 explains the rationale behind this:

6. "Bhikkhus, whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of sensual desire, he has abandoned the thought of renunciation to cultivate the thought of sensual desire, and then his mind inclines to thoughts of sensual desire. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of ill will... upon thoughts of cruelty, he has abandoned the thought of noncruelty to cultivate the thought of cruelty, and then his mind inclines to the thought of cruelty, and then his mind inclines to thoughts of cruelty."

[The sutta eventually goes on to describe the Buddha entering upon and abiding in the four rupa jhanas, then attaining the three true knowledges and finally attaining Nibbana.]

Would you say that MN 2 and MN 19 are also later additions, Bhante?

**BHANTE VIMALARAMSI:** I think you will see that what I am talking about is consistent with the whole thrust of the Buddha's teachings. In sutta number 2: The removal and taking away of sensual desire, or ill will etc. is done by what I have already talked about. The right effort of the 8 fold path explains to notice the distraction, let it go, relax the tightness or tension and softly redirect the attention back to the meditation object and stay on that object. This is how one practices right effort [which I have renamed 'harmonious practice' because it is easier to understand when explained]. In other words this is how one annihilates the hindrance and it won't arise again. The object of meditation is a pure state of being for mind and this is where one's mindfulness becomes very important. The standard use of the word mindfulness seems to be rather confusing because it is used in such general terms, Let's be mindful of this or that, but the question is how and what are we supposed to be 'mindful' of. So, let us use the term 'observation power' instead. This term means to be observant of how mind moves and be aware of it, then let it go, relax and redirect the attention back to the Breath and relaxing some more.

So, any kind of movement of mind is to be observed and let go of then relaxed into. This is how the taints are abandoned. In other words, one's observation power becomes so sharp that even the slightest movement and tightness is seen and let go of before it rises to the surface and becomes a full blown distraction.

Now the question of why sensual desire, ill will and cruelty are unwholesome thoughts as Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi states: The reason that these thoughts are unwholesome is because they cause massive amounts of distractions and make mind forget to see what is happening as a process that is impersonal [which causes even more tightness and tension in both mind and body]. When one's 'observation power' notices that one of these taints has arisen and the meditator lets go of the thoughts about them, then relaxes, next they notice the tight mental fist wrapped around one of these taints and lets go of the feeling around that. Then again they relax and mind is redirected back to the breath and relaxing again. At that time one's observation power becomes stronger and when the taint arises again it can be seen more quickly [at first only marginally quicker, but when this is done over and over again, one becomes more familiar with what happens first... what happens next...

what happens next... etc. then the observation power becomes keener and the taint is seen for what it truly is, nothing more than a process that dependent origination shows us.]

In sutta # 19: Again the Buddha is talking about right effort and going back to the meditation object. In these cases the meditation objects are the Brahma Viharas [loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity].

So I wouldn't say that suttas #2 and #19 are later additions, but when practiced are in accord with all of the other suttas. It is only sutta #20 that I have such a problem with.

I hope this has cleared up some of the confusion.

**BRIAN:** Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu. Thank you for the lucid clarification, and for the continued good will for my mother during her recovery.

If you haven't tired of my questions yet, I would like to ask a tangential question, but one which is not unrelated to this discussion of how to handle the hindrances. It has to do with how we should practice sense restraint, or guarding the sense doors. Even the word "restraint" has definitely forceful connotations. How do you teach the practice of sense restraint, which, in progressive teachings (like the Sama-n-naphala Sutta, DN 2, for example), always precedes the establishment of mindfulness.

<quote> "And how does a monk guard the doors of his senses? On seeing a form with the eye, he does not grasp at any theme or details by which if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. On hearing a sound with the ear... On smelling an odor with the nose... On tasting a flavor with the tongue... On touching a tactile sensation with the body... On cognizing an idea with the intellect, he does not grasp at any theme or details by which if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the intellect evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. Endowed with this noble restraint over the sense faculties, he is inwardly sensitive to the pleasure of being blameless. This is how a monk guards the doors of his senses." <end quote>

My question is: in terms of actual practice, how should this "not grasping any theme or details" be practiced? I have noticed that, on seeing something desirable on television, for example, my tendency is to want to look away, to push the pleasant contact away, out of fear of becoming attached to it and giving rise to an evil, unskillful quality like greed. But that pushing away is aversion, isn't it? Another unskillful quality...

So is the answer to observe this movement of mind, let go of it, and relax into it, as with the hindrances arising in formal sitting meditation?

**BHANTE VIMALARAMSI:** I sincerely hope that this email finds you smiling and happy! The more joy we can cultivate in our lives the happier we will be!

I am always happiest when Dhamma questions are asked, so please don't feel that you are taxing me in any way at all, it brings me joy, thank you! The question about how to restrain the sense doors is an interesting one and you basically do the restraining in the same way that you handle the hindrances. For example: when watching TV a beautiful or painful sight arises, so mind grabs onto it and becomes

enthralled with it. This is called 'getting caught by its signs and features'. In other words, a hindrance arises. The biggest and most troublesome hindrance is 'restlessness' and it seems to always be followed closely by the 'liking or disliking of the object of restlessness', and grabs onto the eye consciousness and uses it. Of course this is how the opening of the craving and clinging turns into being. When that happens we are definitely caught and the ensuing dukkha is always present.

Again, going back to the way mind works through 'seeing dependent origination' is the key. So basically restraining the sense doors means to be watchful of how this process works and to let it go, and of course relax then always...always...always go back to your meditation object, even if it is only for a brief second before mind goes back to a distraction. This is something that can't be stated enough. Going back to your home base of the breath or Metta or whatever, is the way our observation power becomes stronger and our equanimity grows. Just letting go and relaxing without going back to your meditation object doesn't really help at all. So please always "go home" after letting go and relaxing, softly redirecting mind back to the home base of your chosen meditation object.

When watching TV or listening to music, the good functioning sense door has 'contact' with an external object. Right after this contact is made then 'feeling' arises [that is pleasant, painful or neither pleasant nor painful], following on the feeling's heels is 'craving' which is the "I like it... I don't like it" mind, which manifests as tightness or tension in mind and body. Please notice the word "I" and how this is a part of craving. In other words, this is where the false idea that this feeling is "mine" personally begins. Next, the 'clinging' arises and this is all of the reasons that we like or dislike what presents itself to the eye as color and form or the ear as sound; that is, the preconceived ideas about what is seen or heard and also all of the thoughts about why we like it or dislike it.

If one's observation power isn't sharp enough to see this process clearly, one loses their equanimity and becomes so involved with these sights and/or sounds, that they are taken completely out of the present moment and get lost in these hindrances and disturbances. Then what happens is mind starts running around and goes to all different kinds of things. That is when the meditator runs into all kinds of dukkha!

So, in the practical aspects of restraining the sense doors, the meditator simply sees the sight or hear the sound and watches how mind reacts to it. When tightness or tension arises they simply notice it and let it go then relax and briefly go back to the breath and relax again, then, watch as mind gets caught by another thing.

The important thing to remember is to play and have fun with this process. Anytime we start taking things seriously it means that our observation power is weak. That is not a reason to criticize ourselves or condemn our mindfulness. It is a reason to laugh at how tricky mind

is and how easily it gets caught up in the drama. It really is a fun show to watch when our perspective allows us to see things clearly. I have said to many meditators "this by far, is the best show in town". So, have fun with it, laugh with yourself instead of getting caught by a hindrance that pulls mind down into the mud. Another thing that I tell the meditator is "No one has ever said that life is supposed to be taken seriously". This can be a fun ride or a hell realm. It is our own choice. I think having fun with this process is more fun than fighting with it, but that is my own decision for me. You can choose for yourself. That way we can never blame others for our happiness or sadness. We have made our own choice with it.

It might be helpful as a kind of meditation to go to our website at [www.dhammasukha.org](http://www.dhammasukha.org) and then click on the reading the suttas then go to the "six sets of six" and print it out then read it out loud everyday for a couple of weeks. The reason that I say to go to our website is, I took out all of the dot dot dot ... so there is lots of repeating but because this is an oral tradition it can make major changes in the meditation. I have done this for a period of time and found it to be very useful. [please forgive the minor mistakes I have tried to get them corrected but have met with some resistance].

**BRIAN:** Thank you so much, Venerable Sir, I shall do just this for the next couple of weeks. I just finished doing the first recitation, and already I've noticed something new:

For a long while, I have been doing as instructed and regarding the eye as not mine, forms as not mine, eye consciousness as not mine, eye contact as not mine, and eye feeling as not mine (and the same for the other senses & objects, etc.) But when it comes to craving, I've been unknowingly regarding it as mine, as in "My Problem gotta get rid of MY craving..." So reading the sutta "Six Sets of Six" aloud just now gave a little charge of understanding, a little thrill of delight to finally remember: the craving is dependently arisen, too, just like all the others. Not "my problem" after all! I hope this has been of some help to you, and please forgive my getting on the soapbox and 'preaching', old habits sometimes die hard.

This dialogue continues to be of great, great help to me, Bhante, and I'm deeply grateful.

**BRIAN:** In my morning reading, I came back to this sutta again, and read it in light of our recent discussion of the hindrances and methods advocated in the controversial sutta MN 20.

SN 46:51, Ahara Sutta, "Nutriment (in the Factors of Awakening)" [PDF](#)

This sutta states, among other things, the way to starve each of the five hindrances once they have arisen.

1. Sense desire (*kamacchanda*): fostering appropriate attention to the theme of the unattractive.
2. Ill will strong (*vyapada*): fostering appropriate attention to the release of the mind through the Brahma Viharas.
3. Sloth & drowsiness (*thina middha*): fostering appropriate attention to the potential for effort, the potential for exertion, the potential for striving.
4. Restlessness & worry (*uddhaccha kukkuccha*): fostering appropriate attention to stillness of awareness.
5. Uncertainty (*vicikiccha*): fostering appropriate attention to mental qualities that are skillful & unskillful, blameworthy & blameless, gross & refined, siding with darkness & with light.

This sutta would seem to support the first method given in Majjhima Nikaya 20, Vitakka Santhana Sutta: substituting a more skillful theme for an unskillful one, like a carpenter using a smaller peg to knock out a larger one. And it states which small peg to use for each of the hindrances.

Should this sutta be regarded as a late addition to the Canon as well?

**BHANTE VIMALARAMSI:** One of the most important things to remember about the Buddha and his teachings is that he was very much interested in keeping things as simple as possible. I totally agree with Khema when she said "I try to keep things as simple as possible". That sutta was actually talking about daily activity meditation, not so much the sitting practice. When we read the suttas we have to try to understand that the Lord Buddha was talking to certain types of people and he explained things in a way that they specifically would understand .

That said let's look at these hindrances individually and see how they work and why he said what he did about each one of them.

1. Sense Desire [*kamacchanda*]: fostering appropriate attention to the theme of the unattractive. That Buddha was a true master at giving people an object of meditation that would put their mind in a state of complete balance and acceptance of what was arising in the present moment. The famous 32 body parts meditation is used for those who have a strong lust type of personality. As you may know when sensual desire arises it has the tendency to take mind completely away from the meditation object and become absolutely distracted by these thoughts and feelings of wanting and needing to fulfill that desire. So the Buddha would give that person the 32 body parts to meditate on. Why? Because when one realizes that the body is truly a foul and disgusting thing and there are absolutely no redeeming qualities to be found in it, mind then becomes dispassionate toward it, thus creating a true sense of equanimity and understanding of that hindrance when it arises. Taking the 32 parts of the body as one's meditation object is a very useful meditation. The meditation is done basically the same way as the Loving Kindness meditation, using each body part in a visualization and seeing it for what



it is then relaxing the tightness and realizing that there is nothing beautiful about head hair, for example. It stinks, it is time consuming to take care of, if you order some soup at a restaurant and there is a hair or two in it, how does that make you feel? Etc. Or when a beautiful person distracts the meditator's mind and lust arises, if the meditator sees that person as if they were turned inside out, what is so beautiful? Hey, what a lovely liver you have! Boy I haven't seen such a great set of intestines in a long time!

The point is that whenever a meditator has a distracted mind they first recognize that mind is distracted, then they notice the thoughts about the distraction and let them go... relax... notice the tight mental fist around the pleasant feeling of lust and let the feeling go... relax... softly redirect the attention back to the object of meditation [in this case the foulness of the body] and relax some more.

Before going on, everyone should realize that the fastest way to let go of any hindrance is to laugh at how crazy mind is, having a good honest chuckle about the craziness of mind, brings up joy and as you may or may not have noticed Joy is exactly in the middle of the enlightenment factors, it is the balancing factor so tranquility, collectedness and equanimity can arise. So the less seriously we take a hindrance the easier it is to let go of the

2. Ill will [vyapada]: fostering appropriate attention to the release of mind through the Brahma Viharas. Basically, the answer is the same as the one on Sensual Desire and that is using Loving Kindness [and all] for your meditation object and relaxing. Treating the meditation in the same way as described when any kind of distraction arises. Seeing exactly how it arises and letting it go then relaxing. You may find it interesting to go to Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the Samyutta Nikaya book number 2. Page # 1607 of the [Bojjhangas] 54 (4) 'Accompanied by Loving Kindness'. This sutta shows that the Loving Kindness takes the meditator to the 4th jhana [which goes against the common belief that metta will only take one to the 3rd jhana, and the common belief that the compassion only will take the meditator to the 3rd jhana, as well as appreciative joy and equanimity will take the meditator to the 4th jhana]. And in this sutta it shows that compassion unfolds at the realm of infinite space, appreciative joy unfolds at the realm of infinite consciousness, and equanimity unfolds in the realm of nothingness. This is somewhat different than what I learned for 20 years when practicing Vipassana, then I was always told that the Brahma Viharas were only good for gladdening mind not as a tool that leads directly to the final goal of liberation [which can be explained later]. So if a person has a hatred type of personality this is the best meditation for them to use [but the Brahma Viharas are not necessarily recommended for a lust type of personality for obvious reasons]. So with this meditation practice it is used for balancing one's personality when their mind bend, if you will, tends toward anger and hatred.
3. Sloth and Drowsiness [this word doesn't have the same feel as torpor which means dullness and is closer to the original meaning of middha] (thinamiddha): fostering appropriate attention to the potential for effort, the potential for exertion, the potential for striving. This one and the next hindrance are the sneakiest and most persistent of the hindrances. If you don't take a strong interest in your meditation object, mind will dull out and become kind of dreamy, then before long mind decides to take a nap and one's head begins to nod and body slumps. Sound familiar? So the more interest the meditator takes in their meditation object the less likely they will get caught by sloth and torpor. Before we go any further, it may be good to see the difference between concept and reality. When a hindrance arises we have the tendency to think of them as one big thing, such as LUST or HATRED etc. and these are simply concepts about reality but isn't real in Buddhist terms. In reality a hindrance can be compared to an automobile. When you look at a car what do you actually see? Where is the car? Is it the bumper? or is it the wheels?, or is it the steering wheel?, or is it the motor? or is it the headlights? Where exactly is the car? A car is a lot of little parts put together to make up the 'concept' of an automobile.

In the same way, a hindrance is made up of a lot of little things so then we can call it Lust or Hatred, but what is it exactly? How does it arise? What happens first... what happens next... what happens after that? and so on. SO, when sloth and/or torpor arises how does that happen?

First, you might notice that your mind loses interest in the meditation object. Then it becomes dreamy and dull. Then your posture begins to slump a little and the dreaminess increases and the posture slumps even more and so on until the meditator is completely caught and they are away in sleepy land.

So what does the meditator do? First they notice that their body is about to fall over and if you are like most meditators, immediately, they straighten up and come back to the meditation object for a short period of time before it all happens again. But if the meditator is practicing tranquility meditation, first they notice that their body is slumping and then they notice that mind is completely caught by dullness, and then they let go of the thoughts and relax the tightness in their body and head. Now they see the tight mental fist wrapped around the feeling and let it go. Then they relax and redirect their attention back to the meditation object and relax again. Again mind will only stay on the meditation object for a little while before this whole process begins again. But, the real difference is now they try to see how this process works! As the meditator becomes more and more familiar with how this process works, then they will naturally bring up their energy and interest. The more the meditator becomes familiar with the process, the easier it is to see how it happens and the quicker the hindrance goes away.

I haven't described all of the things that happen when sloth and/or torpor arises, but you can get the idea from what was said. The investigation of our experience leads to more effort and energy and then the meditator's striving and interest helps to see it for what it truly is, a bunch of little things that make up this concept of it being ours personally. This is how anicca, dukkha, anatta are seen and realized.

4. Restlessness and Worry [Again, I like the word anxiety rather than worry this is just a personal like for this, nothing more] (uddhacca kukkuccha): fostering appropriate attention to stillness of awareness. As amazing as it may seem, restlessness is probably the biggest and most troublesome hindrance that we have [with all of the other hindrances running a close second]. Every wandering thought is restlessness every like and/or dislike is a part of restlessness. So all of the other hindrances have some restlessness in them. The meditation object best suited for restlessness is the peace meditation. This is very much akin to the loving kindness meditation. When mind becomes overwhelmed with restlessness and anxiety the meditator recognizes it [most times after a period of time and the story begins to repeat itself]. They let go of the thoughts even if they are in mid sentence. Then they relax... now they notice the tight mental fist wrapped around that feeling and let it be... relax and redirect mind back to the meditation object of peace and calm feeling, that feeling of peace. Feel mind become calm and at ease. and relax some more.

Seeing this hindrance in the same way described as above with the difference between concept and reality.

5. Uncertainty [vicikiccha]: Fostering appropriate attention to mental qualities that are skillful and unskillful, blameworthy and blameless, gross and refined, siding with darkness and with light: This is overcome by a variety of ways. The practice of meditation is not just about sitting like a statue for long periods of time. When the Buddha talked about mental development he always said that one must cultivate their generosity, their virtue and then they will be ready to sit in meditation. When mental development is practiced in this way, doubt about the practice almost never arises. Why? because they have already seen that what he taught leads to happiness. Another thing that is helpful is having spiritual friends to talk with [if no teacher is available].

So you can see by this that there is no forcing mind down mind by ramming one's tongue up to the roof of their mouth. The key to remember is always following dependent origination in every situation to see if one is following the Buddha's teachings correctly. This means to always let go of the movement of mind, relax, and redirect your attention to the meditation object. Your meditation object and relaxing are the wholesome object that leads to Nibbana.

**BRIAN:** Thank you for this marvelous exposition on the hindrances. It is, indeed, very beneficial, especially the clarification that this sutta is referring more to daily activity meditation and not so much the sitting practice.[...]

The discussion of vyapada was particularly helpful to me, as that is the big champion hindrance for me along with restlessness, as you pointed out. My personality is of the hatred type.

The sutta you mention from the Samyutta Nikaya is one that has fascinated me for a while now, especially in that it contradicts the notion (picked up from the Visuddhimagga) that metta can only lead to the 3rd jhana.

Bhante, how exactly is metta to be cultivated along with the 7 enlightenment factors? And what is meant on p.1609 by "the beautiful"? As in this passage:

"Or else he enters and dwells in the deliverance of the beautiful. Bhikkhus, the liberation of mind by loving kindness has the beautiful as its culmination, I say, for a wise bhikkhu here who has not penetrated to a superior liberation."

**BHANTE VIMALARAMSI:** The 'beautiful' referred to in this sutta is talking about how the loving kindness meditation changes from the third jhana and goes into the 4th jhana. What happens is the feeling of radiation in the heart fades away and moves to a radiation that comes directly from mind. At this time, mind is exceedingly bright and radiant, truly a beautiful state of experience.

The way I teach Loving Kindness is called 'breaking down the barriers' so when a meditator has reasonably good control of getting into the third jhana, I will tell them to change their 'spiritual friend' [who they have been radiating to since the beginning] to another 'spiritual friend' and when they can see their new 'spiritual friend' smiling and happy, then change to another 'spiritual friend'. After doing this for 3 or 4 different 'spiritual friends' then I will tell the meditator to radiate metta to family members and good friends. They radiate to their entire family and a few good friends, changing to another after they see a big smile and happiness coming from that person. Next I will come along and say OK now radiate metta to a 'neutral' person and see them smiling and happy, then change to another 'neutral' person and do this for 3 or 4 people. Now I come to the meditator and say the easy work is done! Please radiate metta to a true 'enemy', someone when you think of them mind becomes agitated and when that happens then let go of that person and go back to a 'neutral' person and radiate metta to them until they are smiling and happy, then go back to the enemy and radiate metta. Do this until that person is no longer an enemy, then go to another person who has done you wrong and do this until there are no enemies left.

When the meditator has done this their mind has become very open and getting into the jhana is easy. But this is where the radiation changes from the heart to the head, and sometimes this can be kind of disconcerting to the meditator mostly because the feeling of metta has now become lighter and more expanding. So when the meditator gets to the 4th jhana I will come along and tell them to radiate the metta to the 'six directions' that is in "front", to the "back", to the "right", to the "left", "above", "below" then all around [in every direction] at the same time. They do this and extend the metta out with no limits or boundaries. Mind becomes very uplifted and quite beautiful. To say the least this is a very fun meditation and one can feel the radiation expand beyond this universe! Great stuff!!!

Anyway, when mind becomes calmer the feeling of metta changes and the meditator begins to feel mind expanding in all directions at the same time again without boundaries [I generally don't talk about how the feeling changes because I want the meditator tell me. so I know where they are in their meditation] When this happens mind is now experiencing infinite space and infinite 'Compassion'. At this time, mind is continually expanding and growing out and there is no center point! This is the state of meditation that the Lord Buddha practice every morning for at least an hour.

As mind goes deeper and becomes even more calm, then the feeling changes again so the Compassion changes into the 'Appreciative Joy' and mind's awareness speeds up so much that the meditator will see individual thought moments arising and passing away, very quickly and

without a break. The feeling of Joy is definitely different from the feeling of metta and karuna but it is even more subtle and pleasant. This is when the meditator sees the reality of anicca [impermanence] and anatta [the impersonal nature of all existence and also they see first hand that there is no one controlling anything]. A very profound state of realization. Of course, the meditator sees the dukkha of this whole situation. I have had meditators come to me and complain about how truly tiresome it is to continually see impermanence in every thing all of the time, this continual impermanence is true DUKKHA with nobody home to direct or control it.

As the meditator goes deeper into the meditation the feeling changes again and becomes very subtle and mind is in an exquisite state of equanimity, mind is very alert and strongly balanced. This is when mind stops looking outside of itself and they see nothing but slight movements of mind. This is always a rather comical time for the teacher because the meditator comes and says that something is wrong with their meditation. One meditator said 'I feel like a fool sitting there looking at nothing!' But this is when the meditation becomes more interesting than ever before. Why? Because now the meditator's mind is so alert it sees even the slightest movement and lets it go quickly and easily. And this is where they learn about true balance of energy. If they put too much energy into seeing what is happening then mind becomes restless and not in the jhana anymore. So the meditator has to work with the hindrance until it goes away. Or sometimes the meditator doesn't put quite enough energy into seeing what is happening in the meditation and then they have torpor arise [torpor is dullness of mind, sloth doesn't seem to arise at this level of meditation] and the meditator has to work with that until it fades away. Every hindrance that arises in all of life both daily activities and sitting meditation is there to help us gain a true sense of balance and when they are let go of mind has a real sense of relief and it goes deeper so mind can then be more alert and aware without that subtle block to awareness. So even now the meditator "Needs" to have a hindrance arise so when it is let go of and relaxed into then mind goes deeper than ever before.

And this is how one experiences the Brahma Viharas according to this sutta. Of course there are still deeper states of meditation to experience before one experiences Nibbana. And this form of meditation has the fastest progress of any form of meditation. In other words, the Brahma Viharas move toward the experience of Nibbana faster than any other type of watching of the other meditation objects. And this includes the breath meditation. Then why didn't the Lord Buddha teach Metta to everyone all of the time? Because it is not a suitable meditation object for every type of personality. But Mindfulness of Breathing is suitable to all types of personality. It is kind of interesting that Mindfulness of Breathing is mentioned 8 times in the suttas and the Brahma Viharas are mentioned at least 1000 x's.

**BRIAN:** Thank you so much for this exposition on the Brahma Viharas and arupa jhanas. I've copied it into a text file so that I may continue to refer to it. May I email you off-list to discuss what happens as my practice inclines in this direction?

**BHANTE VIMALARAMSI:** Are you smiling NOW! Good. [...] Brian please feel free to email me off list, I look forward to hearing from you always. Your observations and questions are very interesting. Thank you for having such in depth conversations with me, I appreciate it. These are the kinds of things monks sit around and discuss and as I haven't been around many monks in this country, I kind of miss it. So I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate your Dhamma efforts. Keep smiling and remember TAKE NOTHING SERIOUSLY!

**BRIAN:** Yes, I'm smiling quite happily now.

[Download File](#)

---